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SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: LATEST POLLS FUEL EARLY ELECTION
SPECULATION

SUMMARY

1. (SBU) Recent opinion polls showing continuing strong support for PM Gruevski personally, despite a slight drop in support for his government, have intensified local speculation that the Prime Minister will call for snap elections after the NATO Summit in Bucharest this April. Support for the government's ethnic Albanian junior coalition partner, DPA, continues to fall, while opposition SDSM's numbers show a slight rise in popularity and ethnic Albanian opposition DUI maintains strong public backing. Public support for NATO membership remains strong, at 89 percent. The growing gap between high public expectations for rapid progress on economic growth and perceived lackluster government performance may push the popular Prime Minister to hold early elections after the Bucharest Summit, regardless of whether Macedonia receives a NATO invitation. End summary.

SLIGHT BOOST FOR THE OPPOSITION, NATO SUPPORT STRONG

2. (SBU) The results of the International Republic Institute's (IRI) latest opinion poll -- reflecting attitudes during the last quarter of 2007 -- have fueled local speculation that Macedonia might face early elections after the NATO Summit in Bucharest this April. Both of the main government coalition parties, VMRO and DPA, experienced a small drop in public support, while opposition SDSM and DUI fared slightly better than in the previous quarter. Despite the opposition's improved standing, however, Gruevski's party maintains a solid 3:1 lead over opposition SDSM.

3. (SBU) Most poll respondents indicated that political leaders were not addressing voters' main concerns, and that developments in Macedonia were moving in the wrong direction. The poll showed unemployment continued to figure as the top issue of concern among citizens, although concerns about general stability and resolution of the name issue were also high. Despite continuing high support for NATO membership -- nearly 90 percent -- most respondents believe political leaders here spend too much time talking about that issue instead of talking -- and doing something about -- joblessness and economic issues.

¶4. (SBU) The poll figures continued the trend IRI first reported in September 2007, which showed the beginnings of a combustible combination of high public expectations and lackluster government performance in achieving economic growth targets. Unlike the government he leads, however, PM Gruevski remains highly immune to negative public sentiment, with 56% of respondents rating his job performance as "excellent," a rating unequaled by any other prime minister in the region, according to IRI staff.

LEANING TOWARD EARLY ELECTIONS WITH OR WITHOUT A NATO INVITE

¶5. (SBU) Junior coalition partner DPA angrily dismissed the IRI poll, which showed its rival DUI gaining at its expense, as a tool to "pressure DPA to accept early elections." A marathon weekend meeting of the DPA leadership resulted in the surprise directed mass resignation on January 20 of all DPA Ministers and Deputy Ministers. Speculation about the resignations centered on DPA President Thaci's dissatisfaction with the work of the DPA ministers, and DPA's low poll ratings, and his desire to exert pressure on PM Gruevski or on his own party functionaries.

¶6. (SBU) Given Gruevski's strong approval scores and DPA's continued slippage, media speculation about behind-the-scenes planning for early elections immediately heated up. VMRO's continued 3:1 lead over SDSM prompted statements by some VMRO members that it would be advantageous to call snap elections after April, regardless of whether Macedonia receives a NATO invitation. SDSM was reserved about that prospect, but a rather smug DUI made it known that it was in a good

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bargaining position for such a scenario, with party leaders telling us they would trade support for early elections in exchange for Gruevski's commitment to pursue DUI's legislative agenda if they were included in a future government.

COMMENT

¶7. (SBU) If Macedonia receives a NATO invitation in April, PM Gruevski is virtually certain to capitalize on a resulting surge in popular support for his government to call early elections in the summer. That would allow him to build a much stronger parliamentary majority, assuming he invited DUI to join him as his ethnic Albanian coalition partner. Even without a NATO invitation, however, Gruevski is well-positioned to call snap elections. In that event, he would rally support among ethnic Macedonian supporters by wrapping himself in the flag and blaming Greece and ethnic opposition DUI for having unjustly ruined Macedonia's NATO prospects. If current trends continue, the rising wave of public expectations also would push Gruevski to seek a new coalition that could more effectively deliver on his economic growth program. Either way, however, Gruevski likely considers that in domestic political terms he is in a win-win situation in which he can be less flexible in making domestic political concessions to the opposition, and more rigid in dealing with Athens on the name issue.

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